

16 Pentecost, Proper 18, 2019
September 8, 2019
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Psalm 1 Philemon 1-21 Luke 14:25-33

Today we read and hear the end of Moses' last major speech. The Israelites are looking to the Promised Land; Moses will die without having gotten there. His gift was to see the land, and not, in the end, to go there. We might expect Moses' words to express remorse, but that is not the case. Choose life! Moses exhorts. Choose life and not death. It is really easy to take us down the path of what is called the prosperity gospel – you know this “good news” even if you did not know its name. The prosperity gospel wants us to believe that doing good things brings us good things. Has that been the case in your life? () Mine either. We might be tempted to say (cheer/toast): choose life anyway!

Back to Moses:

Moses' words do not end at choose life and prosper, and it is important to take into account the whole of his words. Moses' context is that he has been leading a people for a very long time, and has been working to establish in their practices and in their hearts that there is one God and only one God.

The commandment: “have no other gods before me” might not even get us to monotheism, but it is a step in that direction. More so is the later Temple prayer: “Hear oh, Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one.” The prayer tells us to put these words (and there are more words) on our heart and on our soul.

Prominent stories in the Torah are about worshipping other – sometimes many – “little g” gods. The words that Moses heard from God and that he inscribed on the tablets are about the one “big G” God. The Lord is one. From this view of the Promised Land, Moses gives a warning: the little g gods bring death. If you are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them ... you will perish.” Give up these other gods! Choose life by following the commandments of the one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this same God who is one, brings life.

Sitting beside the words of Moses are these shocking words from Jesus:

²⁶“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. We remember that Jesus is traveling at this point with large crowds of people. (Not just crowds but large crowds.) Can we say that everyone in a crowd is committed to the same core purpose? Probably not. Some are following Jesus; some are following the people who are following Jesus; some want to be part of the “in”

crowd. There are friends, followers, curiosity seekers – altogether in this throng. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to die. The trip is not one of pleasure, but of obedience, of deep betrayal from his closest friends, of flogging, mockery, and death.

Jesus says, in plain words: “You cannot all do this.”

This “cannot” is not about permission. We heard last week that everyone is invited to the table, and that we ought to be inviting people into our lives who specifically cannot pay us back. In expecting nothing in return we glorify God. Permission, or an invitation, has been given to all of us. Today’s message is that without God we physically, prayerfully, emotionally, bodily are unable to follow Jesus in the way that God desires. We cannot run a 5k if we are unable to run, and are unable a little over 3 miles. We can stand at the starting line, take off at “go,” ... and not finish the race. So it is with discipleship. We need God. Jesus will let us be with him, follow him, and WE must decide the rest.

Then there is the word “hate.” In the first century, the Hebrew word “hate” did not mean what it does today. We use the word quite indiscriminately, casually: we hate hot weather or pistachio ice cream or the Patriots or whatever. “Hate” in its biblical context means something quite different.

We remember the story of Rachel and Leah. Jacob fell in love Rachel, the younger daughter of Laban. On the wedding day, Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Leah instead, Leah who was “tender-eyed” instead of the beautiful Rachel. Genesis 29:30 reads: [Jacob] loved Rachel more than Leah...and verse 31: “When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb.” “Hated” in this Hebrew context means “loved less,” or “to put in second place.” (Bivin, 18) Leah was not “hated by Jacob or by God. Jacob put Leah in second place to the one he fell in love with at first sight. He loved her less.

So it is with Jesus’ words in this passage. Jesus is telling us about priorities, that we order our priorities, and put our families and our other “loves” second in relationship to our discipleship with Jesus. We love – not as an emotion but as a verb – our Lord and our God. We prioritize our time and our gifts in a Jesus-centered way. We “love less” our own desires and whims, and put in second place those things that interfere with our faith.

The words of Moses and Jesus now come together. “Choose life” coincides with hating those things that distract us from Jesus, from God. We who have chosen to pick up our cross are bound up in the life and death of Jesus, whose own cross was more than he could bear. Still our Lord cried out from the cross: “Forgive them

Father for they know not what they do.” Our advocate hated life so that we will know eternal life.

We have that Advocate now. In fact, we do not have the ability to be true Christ-followers on our own. We are the race participant who cannot run three miles; the course is beyond our ability. We do not, however, run alone. God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is with us, pouring upon us grace upon grace, strength upon strength, calling us as beloved children to know, to follow, Jesus.

Hate something today, and walk with Christ. Choose life! Amen.